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THE ART OF TELANGANA WOMEN AND THE CRAFTING OF THE DECOLONIAL SUBJECT: FROM DIALECTICS OF 'OTHERING' TO EXPRESSIONS OF RADICAL ALTERITY

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ABSTRACT

In this essay I propose a reading of the female body in art as a locus for the display, the negotiation and ultimately the overcoming of gendered and racial dialectics of 'othering'. First, from post-medieval until pre-colonial times, white female bodies depicted in European art largely represented a gendered, sexualised 'other' to the Western male gaze. Successively, with the unfolding of sexual politics of colonialism, non-European female bodies on canvas became metaphorical grounds for the unravelling of racial confrontations between colonisers and colonised. Finally, in the postcolonial era, it appears that women not only subvert, but entirely disregard the subject-object dynamics that for centuries constrained them to being passive objects. From paintings by contemporary female artists in Telangana (India), it emerges that women appropriate art, expressing their own subjectivities unapologetically and independently. Overcoming at the same time the gendered marginality conferred to women in European art, and the racial dialectics of 'othering' pursued through gendered colonial narratives, these artists represent an eminent example of decolonisation in praxis.

INTRODUCTION

Tracing women's voices through art is as fascinating a task, as it is an arduous and inevitably unfinished one. It is fascinating because art is that field where the unbridled freedom of imagination meets and negotiates the all too palpable constraints of matter and technique. It is an arduous task, since the artwork is a locus where a multiplicity of gazes—of the observer, the artist and, oftentimes, the product itself—converge, entering into simultaneous dialogues that reciprocally shape each other. Finally, to trace women's voices in art is an inevitably unfinished task, as the meaning of an art product is the eternally changing testimony of interpretive paradigms past and future.

While there are numerous points of confluence in the trajectory of women across Indian and European art, to focus on such parallels would be reductive. Not only would the sheer diversity of women's necessarily-contextualised voices be neglected;¹ also the significant role that gendered conceptions of race have played in the construction of a meta-narrative that portrayed Indian men as effeminate—and operated as a rationale of colonialisation—would be concealed.² Moreover, to reflect on the differences between women in European and Indian art offers the opportunity to appreciate the original contributions entailed in each milieu.

In the next pages, I briefly outline some trends in Western art that indicate a shift in the apperception of female figures, as from mere objectified muses they become full-fledged artists. Subsequently, following the white male's gaze as it expanded towards ever wider and exotic horizons, I discuss how India engaged with a Western visual narrative that made her the marginal 'other' to a central Europe. Initially, the Subcontinent reacted *within* the parameters of this one-history outlook (first by opposing and then by subverting it); later, in actualising new independent narratives, the Subcontinent positioned itself *outside* the one-history framework. In the last section, I illustrate the overcoming of the Western dialectics of 'othering' through the art of Telangana women, who ignore the assumption of a Western- and of a male-dominated world altogether, thus providing an exemplary case of decolonisation in praxis.

ON 'BEING OTHERED' AND 'OTHERING' AS (WHITE) WOMEN

Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.

Guerrilla Girls³

At least from the post-medieval period onward, women have been among the favourite and most persistently represented objects in Western art. From Michelangelo, Botticelli, Bernini, through Degas, Renoire, Monet, Gauguin, all the way up to Klimt, Modigliani and Warhol,

¹ See Chandra Talpade Mohanty "Under Western Eyes" (1984) on the importance of appreciating women's realities and needs in their contexts.

² See for example Ashish Nandy's essays in *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (1983).

³ Guerrilla Girls. *Conscience of the Art World*. 1989, <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/naked-through-the-ages>. Accessed 2 November 2017.

the most famous paintings of male artists are those representing women in different forms. Mostly they are scantily clad, and at times they even are the only naked presence among a congregation of fully dressed men. While early depictions of women were meant to evoke mystical or religious sentiments (see for example Botticelli and Michelangelo),⁴ later, female bodies became the backdrop against which to study movement (as in Edgar Degas),⁵ project exotic phantasies (see Paul Gauguin)⁶ or explore erotic sensibilities (as has done Andy Warhol).⁷



Manet, Edouard. *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*. 1863. Musée d'Orsay.

To a large extent, it is only since the last decades of the Twentieth century that an increasing number of women in the West has been able to move away from the ascribed role as sublimated or sensationalised 'other'. Women have begun to take charge of the production of artworks by reclaiming a creative presence as art-makers, and the larger public of art-

⁴ This is expressed in Sandro Botticelli's numerous works depicting the Madonna, such as the famous *Madonna del Libro* (1479). A recent exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, *Botticelli and the Search for the Divine* (2017), examined in detail the religious sentiment represented in the artist's work. One of Michelangelo's most famous sculptures, the *Pietà* (1498-1499), housed in the Basilica di San Pietro in Vatican City, also directly appeals to the figures of Mary and Jesus.

⁵ Edgar Degas is especially famous for his numerous depictions of dancers, which constitute more than half of his work. See for example *La Classe de Danse* (1873-1876).

⁶ Paul Gauguin is widely known for his portraits of exotic Tahitian women, mostly represented bare-chested. See also the next section of this essay.

⁷ Among Andy Warhol's best-known works figure the silkscreen painting *Marylin Diptych* (1962) and the film *Chelsea Girls* (1966). In both transpires the confluence of eroticism and stardom, two themes running through much of Warhol's work.

consumers and critics has begun to recognise them as more than sole sources for male inspiration.⁸

At the same time, a re-evaluative process is underway by which female voices from the past are retrieved and retrospectively appraised as influential in a field that was for centuries determined by men. Clara Peeters, Joan Carille and Artemisia Gentileschi stand out as women artists of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries, whose paintings are today being rediscovered and gaining fame. Even though the retroactive acknowledgment of their talents is crucial for a historicisation of European art, it has to be remembered that women constituted a minority among the artists, as it was particularly arduous for them to gain access to the tools of the trade.⁹



Gentileschi, Artemisia. *Giuditta decapita Oloferne*. 1614-20. Galleria degli Uffizi.

Other women who have taken up the activity of artists and challenged the male gaze include the Nineteenth century impressionists Berthe Morisot and Marie Bracquemond and the Twentieth century expressionists Marianne von Werefkin and Gabriele Münter. The former

⁸ Among the contemporary female artists who have finally begun to be acknowledged as major players in the current art scene are Louise Bourgeois, Marina Abramović and Niki de Saint Phalle. While at times mentioned for their feminist perspectives, these artists do not necessarily associate themselves with the feminist or any other particular movement. Louise Bourgeois is particularly known for her large sculptures and installations where she explores domesticity, family, sexuality and the body (see Weidemann, Larass and Klier's *Fifty Women Artists You Should Know* (2008)). Marina Abramović's performative art centres around the limits of the body and identity, often making her audience an active component of her works (see *Fifty Women Artists You Should Know* (2008) and Cristina Demaria's essay "The Performative Body of Marina Abramović" (2004)). While the sculptor Niki de Saint Phalle has risen to fame with her playful sculptures such as those figuring in *Il Giardino dei Tarocchi* (1998) near Grosseto, Italy, her earlier work often expresses anger and violence in art pieces that she shot with firearms (see Jane Neal "Niki de Saint Phalle: The Power of Playfulness" (2008)).

⁹ The art world was usually open only to women who were born into a family of artists, such as Artemisia Gentileschi, daughter of the accomplished painter Orazio Gentileschi. While Artemisia did gain some popularity among her contemporaries, her fame was however not primarily due to her art. Rather, she became renowned due to her outspoken testimony in court against Agostino Tassi for raping her. It is only over the last decades, that the brilliant follower of Caravaggio has been recognised for her work as such. See Linda Nochlin's essay "Why have there been no Great Women Artists?" (1971) and Griselda Pollock's essay "Feminist Dilemmas with the Art/Life Problem" (2005).

two chose predominantly female objects in their artworks, appropriating the representation of women until then chiefly undertaken by men; the latter two, in accordance with the artistic predilections of their time, experimented mostly with emotions, transposing sentiments such as angst into distorted landscapes.

From the later part of the Twentieth century onward, with second and third wave feminisms blooming, patriarchal structures that had suffused much of the Western art world were increasingly condemned also by the wider public discourse. Bringing to light gender injustices across politics and history primarily through provocative slogans, artists such as the US-based Guerrilla Girls refuse to be part of a narrative that repeatedly positions women either at the margins as artists, or at the centre as objectified bodies.



Girls, Guerrilla. Conscience of the art world. 1989.

Around the same time as Western women started to be increasingly involved in the production of art, destabilising centuries-old male-oriented perspectives, the white male gaze began wandering towards new territories, attracted by hitherto unexplored female bodies, and ready to craft new feminised subjects.

ON 'BEING OTHERED' AND 'OTHERING' AS BROWN WOMEN AND AS A FEMINISED NATION

Even Madagascar is too near the civilised world; I shall go to Tahiti...and out there I hope to cultivate [my art]...in its primitive and savage state

Paul Gauguin¹⁰

During India's colonial history, whereas the white settler shaped geo-politics, the white artist moulded imaginaries. In literary and visual representations, European artists advocated a meta-narrative that posited a virile, white male at the centre, surrounded by an emasculated, Indian subordinate at the margins.¹¹ This confluence of gender and race, whereby Indian

¹⁰ Gauguin, Paul. Letter to Émile Bernard, from Arles, about November 9-12, 1888. Quoted from Ives Colter Feller and Stein Susan Allison, "Gauguin in Tahiti: 1891-93, 1895-1901", in *The Lure of the Exotic: Gauguin in New York Collections. The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, Colta Ives and Susan Allison Stein. 77-79. London: Yale University Press, 2002.

¹¹ See Ashish Nandy's *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (1983) for elaborations on the imposition of a gendered history.

men were construed as the antithesis of European men, gave rise to a sexual politics of colonialism, which ultimately was largely played out on the body of the Indian woman.



Gauguin, Paul. *Deux Tahitiennes*. 1899. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

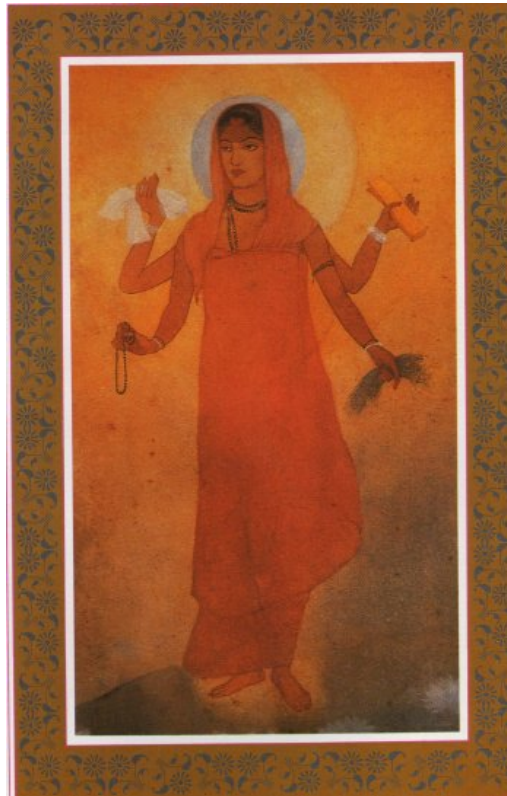
On the one side, for the colonisers, the brown or black female body represented the 'other' to the prude and clean body of the Victorian woman: lascivious, hyper-sexual, at times dirty, an object of lust to be conquered and onto which to direct one's exotic desires. This is perhaps most evidently expressed in several exaggerated depictions of Hottentot women,¹² fetishised harems, and throughout Gauguin's work. On the other side of the dialectic of 'othering', to the colonised, the body of the Indian woman became a repository of purity and chastity. The extent to which Indian men succeeded in protecting it from the invaders' debauching gaze became a proof and a directly proportional measurement of their disputed masculinity. Conversely, the degree to which Indian women could preserve their bodies untainted by the foreign salacious look became an indication of their moral strength and purity.

As a symbol embodying an undefiled and self-sacrificing woman, rose the image of 'Mother India'. In the homonymous film,¹³ director Mehboob Khan depicted Mother India as a righteous and patriotic heroine who maintains the highest moral values despite adverse circumstances; similarly, in his painting *Bharat Mata*, Abanindranath Tagore represents a woman in the guise of a Hindu goddess as emblem of devotion to the motherland. The

¹² The most famous of the Hottentot women was Sara Baartman. Due to her large backside she was exhibited in various European exhibitions during the Nineteenth century, under the name Hottentot Venus. See Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully's biography *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A ghost story and a biography* (2009).

¹³ Khan, Mehboob. *Mother India*. Directed by Mehboob Khan. 1957. India: Mehboob Productions. Film.

image of the chaste and strong Indian woman became a powerful political tool. At the same time vindicating Indian masculinities and symbolising an independent India, the pure and unscathed Indian female body was a sexually charged metaphorical battleground contested between Englishmen wishing to fulfil their colonial desires, and Indianmen striving to actualise their yearning for nationhood.



Tagore, Abinandranath. *Bharat Mata*. 1905. Victoria Memorial.

The counter-narrative that India advanced against the colonisers by presenting the image of a gendered nation embodied as 'Mother India', still unfolded within the contours laid out by the one-history vision furthered by Europe. It can thus be argued that during the colonial era and the early years of Independence, the Subcontinent's reaction against its ascribed moral and political inferiority rested upon an implicit admission of its own historical, political and geographical marginality. Shifting the analysis from still to moving images, it becomes evident that the dynamics of the gaze, and its implied power-relations, changed over time. In recent Indian cinematic productions, in fact, the politics of eroticisation have not only been reverted, but also used as a pervasive subversive tool.

Fully appropriating the dynamics of the exoticising game, Indian producers are today returning the gaze at the Western man and challenging his virility by sexualising and exposing white female bodies in item-songs or deploying Western women as negligible

background actresses.¹⁴ Protracting the age-old imaginary of the pristine female body as a trope for integrity and morality, Indian cinema urges the white man to reassess his manliness and his ability to safeguard the honour of his women and, by extension, his nation. Moreover, when confining the roles of scantily clad white women to secondary characters, Indian movies perform more than just returning the gaze and reclaiming a subject-position in the dialectics of 'othering': by sexualising white female bodies first, and relegating them to trivial roles successively, Indian contemporary cinema effectively overturns the centre-margin positionalities envisioned by Eurocentric, one-history discourses.¹⁵

What remains intact in both, Eurocentric and Indiacentric narratives, is the notion of the female body as a repository of the virtue, dignity and prowess of a nation and its (male) citizens.

ON OVERCOMING THE DIALECTICS OF 'OTHERING': THE UNAPOLOGETIC ART OF TELANGANA WOMEN

A radical unsettling of the structures of 'othering' that have underpinned much Western and Indian art till date, can be observed in the work of some contemporary South Indian female artists. Collectively known as *Mukta*, a creative platform for Telangana women, these artists advance a fundamental change of the female presence in—and through—art. While the female body at first constituted primarily an 'other' against which European male subjects could assert their gendered selves and, subsequently, was deployed as a trope through which both, European and Indian men, could negotiate their racial identities, in the art presented by *Mukta*, women emerge as full-fledged subjects, on and behind the canvas.¹⁶

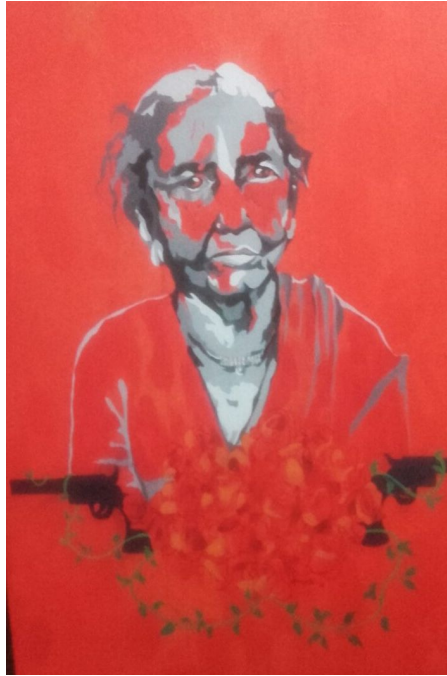
Observing the work of these artists, it emerges that they not only refuse to engage with common centre-margin dynamics and male-oriented discourses, but adamantly ignore them, allowing for the creation of uncompromised, novel narratives. Their paintings, depicting primarily women, but also men, animals and landscapes, strike for their candour and for the confidence with which the represented objects reclaim attention. Strong colours and bold shapes, unexpected close-ups and novel juxtapositions assert their presence audaciously—at

¹⁴ Foreign women are sought after as backup dancers in major Bollywood productions as well as in regional cinema. See the video to the song *Chammak Challo* from the film *Ra.One* (2011) as an example from mainstream Bollywood; for regional cinema see for example the Tollywood film *Yevade Subramaniam* (2015). See also the video to the song *Chiggy Wiggy* of the Bollywood film *Blue* (2009), featuring a very sensual Kylie Minogue; whereas Minogue plays a central role in the video of the song, in the larger context of the film hers is a cameo-appearance. For a scholarly analysis of the phenomenon of white women in Indian cinema see Ajay Gehlawat's *Twenty-First Century Bollywood* (2015), especially the chapter "The Gori in the story: the shifting dynamics of whiteness in Bollywood" (pp. 66-87).

¹⁵ See also my piece "The Gaze" for a more detailed discussion on the politics of 'othering' through cinema (Hirmer 2016).

¹⁶ The argument that I am bringing forward in this section is the result of reflections on paintings by a group of female artists from Telangana, India, who collectively exhibited their works during the Hyderabad Literary Festival in February 2018. These reflections are further backed by conversations I had with some of the artists, which took place in Hyderabad in early 2017 and per email correspondence during 2018. I thank Vimala Katikaneni for giving me access to the paintings referred to and for facilitating the interviews with the artists.

times unwittingly. The bold lack of referentiality to established narratives not only expresses the radical alterity of these paintings, but also translates into their inherently self-sufficient nature.



Biluka, Nirmala. *Guns n roses*. 2016. Photograph by: Katikaneni Vimala.

Guns n roses, an artwork of Nirmala Biluka, is reminiscent of Tagore's *Bharat Mata*. Similarly to Tagore's work, the female warrior in *Guns n roses* is the sole subject of the painting; like *Bharat Mata*, she looks slightly to the side and far into the distance, and is equally dressed in red robes, holding her weapons in her hands. Differently from the ethereal *Bharat Mata* encircled by an aura, however, the Telangana warrior is a worldly woman from the Washermen caste. While *Bharat Mata* fights a battle on the grounds of morality and ethical values, the Telangana warrior fights against the *zamindars* (landlords) for her land during the peasant movement in Telangana. Moreover, while the honour and dignity of *Bharat Mata* depend on Indian and foreign men, the Telangana warrior does not repose her destiny into the hands of anyone other than herself: she fights with guns and roses, 'as symbolically they represent a woman's sensitivity and strength', says Nirmala.¹⁷ The Telangana woman warrior resolutely devises her own history, shifting her local, female reality from the margins to a new centre, at once overcoming Eurocentric as well as androcentric accounts.

Similarly bringing centre-stage often neglected and marginalised subjects, Amila Reddy in her paintings presents women in everyday life as they attend to ordinary chores, inspired from her own village life. When asked about her work, the artist says that she depicts 'Telangana culture, especially rural environments and women's activities...women's emotions and their capability of working in different fields'.

¹⁷ The interviews with Nirmala, Amila, Preeti and Subhashini used in this essay were conducted in 2018 via email.



Reddy, Amila. *Untitled*. Not dated.
Photocredit: Artist



Reddy, Amila. *Untitled*. Not dated.
Photocredit: Artist

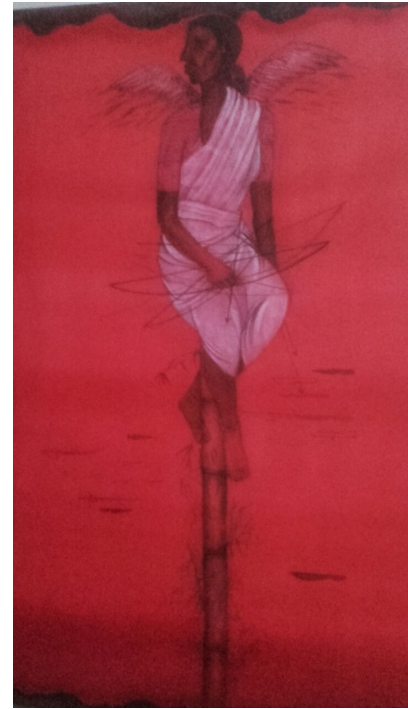
The women in Nirmala and Amila's paintings, as well as those in the works of other *Mukta* artists, do not look for external points of reference through which to find validation or with which to engage in subverted centre-margin dynamics. In proclaiming their autonomous completeness, and entirely eschewing the need to oppose, or subvert, ascriptions of ambiguous erotic moralities or marginal positionalities in imaginary topographies, these female artists transcend, at the same time, the politics of 'being othered' and of 'othering'.

Also when it comes to claiming their legacy, these women assert an exceptional autonomy that distinguishes them from other artists, who instead often inscribe their work into comforting, yet restrictive established traditions. When asked about her motivations to paint and where she draws inspiration from, Nirmala states: 'for me art is a way of living, expressing my thoughts and emotions. Usually my art reflects the current situations or experiences I go through as a woman artist'. Similarly, Preeti Samyukta explains: 'my works are a visual diary of myself, my thoughts...and they also include my growing up in the wilderness...it's a journey inside me, into my emotions and my memories'. She further declares that she is not part of any movement, since her 'preoccupations don't allow for such deliberations'. Subhashini, also an artist part of the collective, on a similar note affirms: 'I am not inspired by any artist but it is only my inner feeling which inspires me to paint'.

By delinking their art from established masters, the Telangana artists exhibit the confident bravery of those who have renounced being accountable to anyone but themselves, thus gaining a self-sufficiency and an authority brimming with creative possibilities. Resorting to legacies that are imbued with spontaneity rather than rooted in formality, and that appeal to emotional rather than intellectual judgments, they further break boundaries with prevailing patriarchal- and Western-oriented frameworks. They embrace what is understood to be a gynocentric, body- and nature-oriented outlook.¹⁸ The work of these artists finds its *raison d'être* in alternative narratives, bringing hitherto marginal histories and the voices of nature, women, bodies and emotions centre-stage as they have rarely been before.



Samyukta, Preeti. *Untitled* 2016.
Photograph by: Katikaneni Vimala



Reddy, Padma. *Of 1948*. 2016.
Photograph by: Katikaneni Vimala

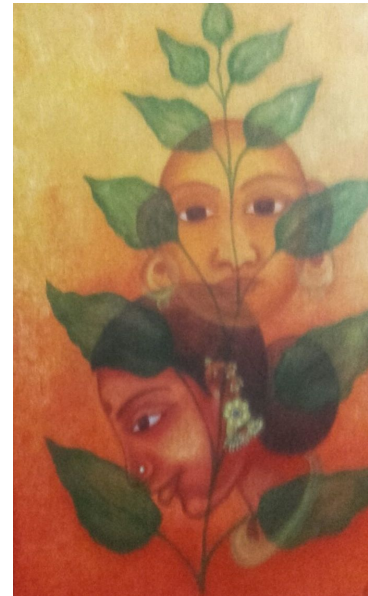
The disengagement with earlier canons of representation, and the power-relations entailed therein, allows these women to undertake an ontological shift that demands, on the part of the observer, an openness toward unexpected and unfamiliar—often displacing—frameworks. Whereas postcolonial artworks from the early independent era onward expose and unsettle the ideologies and power relations perpetrated by colonialism, the art of Telangana women engages in a more fundamental reconfiguration of centre-margin dynamics. Rather than offering a response to colonialism, these artists propose an 'epistemic

¹⁸ The alleged superiority of mind over body, and intellect over emotions is a consequence of the Cartesian mind-body dualism that became central to European thought around the Seventeenth century. The rise of the mind was accompanied by the devaluation of human procreation, given its often-unpredictable rhythms. Procreation being understood as closely linked with nature and female bodies, women were increasingly relegated to separate domains, considered devoid of the rationality that presumably governed men and the public and textual world of minds. For an elaboration on this topic see for example Frédérique Appfel-Marglin and Purna Chandra Mishra's "Gender and the Unitary Self. Looking at the Subaltern in Coastal Orissa" (2008).

de-linking' (Walter Mignolo 2007 p. 450) from its structures, and operate from a place of 'radical exteriority' (Alejandro Valleg 2014).¹⁹



Aeley, Priyanka. *Untitled* 2016.
Photograph by: Katikaneni Vimala



Nagami. *Untitled*. Not dated.
Photograph by: Katikaneni Vimala

The decolonisation in praxis brought forward through *Mukta* emerges as the formulation of a pristine world that no longer engages in the patriarchal, colonial or postcolonial predicaments that largely prevails across European and Indian art; it comes with striking simplicity, and endows the objects in the artworks with a presence that gains in strength proportionally to the ties left behind. It is thus that in these compositions we see, finally, no longer objects, but subjects: subjects that emerge and exist *per se*, outside the purview of a legitimising male gaze or of a centre to which to be a margin. These artworks are transgressive in the simplicity of their existence, unapologetically reclaiming their full legitimisation through the sole enactment of being.

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¹⁹ While postcolonialism and decolonialism are intimately linked and guided by similar principles, the former is usually associated with Indian thinkers such as Gayatri Spivak (1988, 1999) and Homi K. Bhabha (1994), whereas the latter is connected to Latin American scholars such as Walter Mignolo (2007, 2011) and Alejandro Vallega (2014). It can also be said that decolonialism is a more radical effort to present non-Western world-systems, whereas postcolonialism analyses the profound consequences of the colonial enterprise. This is how I refer to the two terms in this essay.

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